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ABSTRACT

Museum programs for adults are characterized by personal enrichment, rather than acquisition of practical or specific useful skills, as the common goal of most learners and program developers. This paper provides an overview of the kinds of adult programming offered in museums today. The institutional context of adult educational programs in museums is examined, including institutional diversity across a range of museums in terms of type of museum, administration, approach to public service, and existence of members' groups. The discussion focuses on the development of educational programming, how educational programs for adults are initiated in museums, and the process of locating and using professional resource materials. Barriers to program development and expansion, and examples of alternative adult programs in museums which demonstrate collaboration between institutions are described. The state of current research in the field of museum education is examined, and research recommendations are made. Twenty readings are suggested, and information is provided on professional resource centers and organizations. (MAS)

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Making the Connection for Lifelong Learning

PANEL BRIEF
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Current Practice & Potential: Research & Adult Education in Museums

To give a brief sketch of the kinds of adult programming offered in museums today, I must start by emphasizing that in a short paper, only the broadest of generalizations are possible. For every point I suggest as "typical," there are probably more exceptions than adherents. However, because this is a field of extraordinary variety in programs, audiences, and institutional settings, a few common features may help give a sense of the state of the art currently.

I should also make it clear that, while I have gained valuable new insights into the breadth and complexity of educational practice in museums since joining the staff of the American Association of Museums several months ago, my comments today are based in my individual experience as an adult educator, mainly in art and history, over about twenty years, and represent only my own opinion.

The Institutional Context of Adult Programs in Museums

Several common circumstances influence the development of educational programs for adults in museums across the country.

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Some of these factors were important in establishing what became "typical" forms of programming in the past, which have left their vestigial mark on current practice. Some of these conditions are still essential and characteristic aspects of museum culture today.

Above all, any account of adult education in museums must take account of an exceptional degree of institutional diversity across the range of museums. Consider the fact that the term "museums" encompasses a range of subject matter from art, of every era from Prehistory to the present, natural science and technology, history, specialized hobbyist topics, and many others. Museums preserve, study, display, and interpret live elephants, eyeglasses, Czarist filigree eggs, video art, barns, war plunder, butterfly wings, and everything in between. As used today, the term denotes history, art, and science museums of all sorts, multi-disciplinary "general" museums, aquariums, botanical gardens, historical sites, art centers, youth museums, commemorative monuments, archives and special library collections, even exhibition areas in countless parent institutions.

There is no such thing as a usual form of governance and organizational type among museums. Museums are formed and operated by all levels of government (federal, state, regional, inter-jurisdictional, and local). Many museums are private in origin and run by independent boards according to a wide range of chartered purposes, while providing varying services to the

general public. Still other museums are operated as subsidiaries or special services by universities and colleges, non-profit organizations or private associations, religious bodies, foundations, or even businesses or professional organizations. The governing authority and institutional origins of a museum can have a wide variety of direct and indirect implications for its style of educational services. For the current purpose, suffice it to say that whether or not a museum is "public" or "private," whether it is independent or part of a parent organization will very often effect its relationship to actual and potential audiences. It may well also influence whether, and how smoothly, it collaborates with other institutions (other museums and counterparts such as libraries, campuses and school systems, civic organizations, service clubs, etc.)

Finally, museums exercise both great variety in approach to the public they serve, often developing complex relations with many distinct or overlapping audience groups. Some museums, whether private or public, located in the nation's capital or not, by law or tradition, are truly national or international in the scope of the public they serve. This can be said of museums as otherwise different as the National Air and Space Museum (D.C.), the Museum of Modern Art (NYC), the Oriental Institute (Chicago), and the San Diego Zoo. Obviously, this does not mean they are providing the same educational programs to all members of this expansive clientele. Their adult programs may include only in-house events at the museum, or they may reach into some

other communities as outreach, packaged audio-visual presentations, or travel opportunities. Most, but by no means all museums, give some degree of priority to the communities of their geographic location. In most cases, museums recognize a need to serve several different circles of community, geographically speaking, in one way or another. Some museums have defined their range of service through direct experience and common sense. For example, one might aim to serve the residents of a tri-state, 12-county region which is reasonably accessible by car. It is not unusual for a museum to identify its base community, ad hoc, as the people who live closer to it than to the next institution that could provide similar exhibits, curricular support, or programming. Sometimes that means several museums "divide" their educational services, informally speaking, with counterparts within a city; in other cases, a zoo or historical art museum may strive to offer substantive programs, one way or another, to interested people living hundreds of miles away, because no comparable institution exists for great distances. It is common to ask, "if we do this for immediate neighborhood residents, and that for the lunch-time working crowd, what can we provide, at least occasionally, for the people who will drive four hours to see our unique display of Mid-western fossils?" A number of museums, some "public," some "private" are mandated to focus on educational services for the legally defined, municipal area (city and suburbs) which jointly provide a tax-based contribution to their budget. By charter or tradition, some museums focus

primarily on quite specific constituencies, for example, the students, staff, and alumni of a college, or the members of a religious faith or ethnic group.

Yet another factor is the frequent presence of members' groups within museums. Sometimes members receive only discounts on the cost of generally available services, including educational programs; other museums offer special programs for members only. In many museums, subsidiary members' auxiliaries themselves offer or sponsor adult education opportunities.

If one generalization can be made about the educational character of museum programs for adults, as compared to the offerings of other kinds of institutions serving mature audiences, it must certainly be that personal enrichment (variously defined), rather than acquisition of practical information or specific useful skills, is the common goal of both most learners and program developers. The themes and factual content presented in museum programs may have significant application in participants' lives, as, for example, when they deal with issues of health, social order, family life, technology, and so on. However, it would be very rare to find an adult attending an event or series to acquire job-training or improved literacy. This may be largely a matter of defining the needs and interests of the adult audience(s) in question, because many more museums do tackle aspects of practical education for children and adolescents, often in connection with local school curricula.

The means by which a museum identifies target audiences and builds its community base is a highly individual process which combines many factors: legal requirements, institutional culture and history, conscious marketing efforts, the character of its collections, the proximity of comparable exhibits and programs, the interests and talents of staff, the need to generate income, and trends in community politics. My sense is that the extent to which museums vary in the scale and range of their natural and targeted constituencies is unusual among educational institutions. They are simultaneously location-specific and expansive in the scope of their communities. Unlike library systems, museums don't as a rule have branches or a local network. Unlike large service associations, they don't have local chapters for the dissemination or replication of programs. But, at the same time, if a museum's collections and related educational program are unique and the subject of widespread interest, then its audience (actual and potential) is likely to be national at least. Every museum I have ever had considerable experience with has been in the continual or episodic process of re-evaluating its core constituencies, and usually, also tailoring services, including education, to selected sub-sets with those communities.

In addition to institutional factors that effect the development of adult education in museums, there is another set of characteristics that have long influenced programming. They mostly fall into two related categories: 1) With some special

exceptions, museums, almost by definition, base their mission on the exhibition and interpretation of things, whether artifacts, specimens, works of art, and 2) museums usually combine research and educational dissemination as dual, essential functions. Any one of the following points could lead to interesting philosophical or didactic discussion. For the sake of this short essay, we should simply make note of the implications of the following factors for the development of educational programming:

Originally, the basic rationale for educational interpretation in museums was the elucidation for the public of the specific institutional collections on display. That is, education was by definition, object-based. Though types of programming have broadened over time to encompass the general subject matter of a museum's collections, the ideas that have grown out of research into collections, the holdings of other similar institutions, and such, the emphasis in museum interpretation is still on real objects. This obviously influences the choice of program subject matter in a given case. It also tends to emphasize certain concepts, such as the experience of "the real thing", and learning approaches, such as assisted investigation methods based on observation and inquiry.

The next major factor in the institutional is that museums generally commit great thought, effort, and resources to the systematic public presentation of objects in exhibitions. As a result, educational programming is often driven by interest in, and promotion of, whichever shows are currently on view, are new,

or are most promising for any given audience. Two other points are relevant here: Exhibitions are not neutral displays of groups of artifacts; they have considerable interpretive content themselves. The interpretive approach of the exhibition itself will tend to influence the thematic contact of related adult programs, though not necessaril, determine it completely. Finally, the duration of exhibitions is a constant consideration in program development. A short show may not provide time for the planning, promotion and completion of substantive educational programs, especially when several different temporary shows may run simultaneously. So, it is not unusual for educators to skip whole topics of interest covered in exhibitions for logistical reasons alone. On the other hand, when a major exhibition ends, an entire slate of educational offerings based on it may become suddenly obsolete. This is especially true of workshops and gallery talks which are directly founded on interpretation of the displayed specimens themselves.

Related to both the centrality of exhibitions in museums and the patterns of use by visitors, a great many education programs are occasional or solitary in nature. Experience in practice is that most adults visit a museum, or a given exhibition, just once. They may come for a specific program, or discover the option of attending an educational event only when they get there. There are numerous cases of on-going lecture series (4 in a season, or weekly for years) and of hands-on workshops offered in an extended series. Still, the one-time event and the

limited, episodic program is the most common format for educational programs. The fact that an appreciable number of participants travel a significant distance to attend a program (across the city, or across the state) is part of this. So is the changeable character of the materials on exhibit. Related to these patterns of use is the fact that many visitors are interested in museums for the museum itself, and may never have been there before. Therefore, institutional orientation and background is frequently desired as a part of such occasional interpretive programs. Many museum educators feel circumscribed in program planning by how little information can be shared, or how few concepts can be developed, within a single talk, tour, workshop or activity. At the same time, the constant arrival of new faces means that opportunities for certain kinds of programs, especially interactive participation based on established rapport, are rare.

Museums are knowledge-rich resources. It is common for the regular staff to include resident experts on various topics. Often these are curators responsible for supervision of the collections and related research. In addition, other members of staff, guest curators of special exhibitions, board members, retired professionals serving in a volunteer capacity, visiting scholars, and others, create a concentration of learnedness and intellectual interest around museums. Many museums maintain a specialized library or research facility, over and above the collections themselves, which are a magnet for knowledgeable

people while providing materials for program ideas and development. Therefore, museums are often in enviable circumstances to design educational programs of richness and depth, using the knowledge of the institutional circle and calling upon the experts to present programs themselves. Beyond sheer information and ideas, this can involve the rewarding experience of sharing personal enthusiasm between leader and audience. At the same time, the interests of the staff scholars and others are closely linked to the special strengths of particular museums in collections and exhibitions. In turn, the long-evolved specialties of a given museum and its personnel tend to determine to a large extent the overall direction of educational programs for the public. This is a separate dynamic from the actual or potential interests of the public audience(s), which may or may not coincide. It is only in the past three or four years (as a rough estimate from memory) that one occasionally hears museum professionals seriously deliberating in public about selecting research and collecting priorities in part in response to the expressed cultural or educational interests of community constituencies. At the best, a strong museum with attractive programming builds on the interests of its audiences with its best intellectual resources, so that the two complement each other. Even with the best of responsive, well-designed programs, however, it is easy to imagine anomalies between the particular resources of a museum and a "typical" local audience, if, hypothetically, the exhibitions and programs repeatedly

featured obscure art-forms, numerous specimens of visually similar hand tools, or unique, but conceptually difficult or specialized subjects. Some museums simply have a clearer juxtaposition of their research and educational roles than others.

In terms of public expectations, the expertise associated with museums may have one more implication for adult programs. Personal experience and the comments of colleagues over the years suggests that in the museum environment, more than anywhere except, perhaps, a university classroom, many program participants expect to hear "the last word" or "the truth" about a subject. Not infrequently, programs designed as participatory discussions or interactive workshops by energetic museum educators turn into more traditional presentations as attenders defer to the authority of the principal presenters. Responses to a letter of inquiry sent out to gather comments from colleagues in preparation for this essay were a chorus of concern about the challenge of overcoming polite passivity and frequent hesitation about active interaction among adult learners.

Lastly, yet one more atmospheric circumstance seems to influence the development of adult programming. This is a direct result of the audience(s)'s perception of museums, individually and as a category of cultural institutions. Many museums enjoy considerable social prestige, due to a combination of cultural attitudes. They are respected as civic, scholarly, and educational institutions. They house and display rare,

interesting, and often costly objects. They are frequently associated with past and present leaders of the community, and with prosperity and affluence. They are the site of publicized and sometimes exclusive social events. They are frequently attractive places to visit, and many have official or unofficial stature as community showcases. Sizable museums especially have a high profile as local institutions and tourist destinations. Overall, this prestige definitely attracts visitors and program participants. However, potent cultural connotations cut both ways. The actual social ambiance and traditional reputation of museums can be daunting or off-putting, as well as appealing. Some people will feel "at home" in a museum and others will not. Associations of class and race are obvious. Other subtler considerations or feelings may also lead audiences and individuals to self-select themselves in ways that are not predictable. And, even when a museum concertedly determines to serve new constituencies and acts to meet that goal, old ideas about the museum may reside in the community for years. Finally, institutional prestige can effect the educational experience itself: awesomeness can contribute to certain kinds of learning and detract from others.

Program Development in Practice

A brief description of how educational programs for adults are commonly initiated may be a useful. It should be said that in the past decade or so, a number of significant changes have

resonated across the field, and this sketch is an oversimplification only for the purpose of identifying a few key points in the process:

Before saying anything else, one circumstance is crucial. Virtually all educational programs in museums are initiated in-house by the staff of the museum (or closely associated contractors). Furthermore, both single events and comprehensive program plans for an entire roster of public programs, serving different interest groups and ages, concerning different topics in different formats, are developed in-house in each separate museum. Educators do check into major schedule conflicts with other local institutions. Sometimes several agencies in one area will organize programs around a common theme or event of shared interest, such as a historical centennial, but coordination is often limited to dividing up the array by audience, calendar, or approach. Colleagues from a museum and a local campus, civic center, and other counterparts may collaborate from time to time. But there is no comprehensive system for the sharing of program ideas between museums, and few on-going program committees cross institutional lines. In part, this is simply customary practice, not to say habit; in part it is the result of chronic crises of tight deadlines which push educators into rapid, solo, or in-house program planning. Not surprisingly, the most important cause is probably the discrete, object-based and exhibition-based nature of much educational programming. In work habits, many museum educators are characteristically extroverted and

collegial, doing lots of informal collegial networking and support. This does not carry over directly into specific program planning very often, however. It is indicative that even several museums hosting the same exhibition on tour will usually not develop educational materials or programs together. I have only been involved in one such collaborative workshop, in advance of an exhibition's national circulation. It occurred last year, and was motivated directly by the chief foundation funder of the traveling exhibition.

Assume that a museum is expecting to open a major permanent exhibition, that is, one that will be on display for a year or more, starting in six months, a year, or more. The broad subject of the exhibition, mid-eastern archeology, world mineralogy, or 20th century painting, for example, have a wide range of interpretive possibilities, as well as points of interest for many different potential audiences.

Until very recently, I think it is fair to say that educators planning programs for voluntary participation by adults most often began first, almost as a given, with the exhibition and the subject it suggested, or with the collections priorities of their institutions (such as interpretation of recent acquisitions). The next stage was to decide how best to present the predetermined topic for the most likely audience or audiences. This is still a common chain of action in museums, all or some of the time. However, in disparate and diverse institutions there does seem to be a widespread trend toward

reversing these considerations, targeting particular audiences, new and established, and then striving to tailor interesting and stimulating educational programs, based on the tangible and intellectual resources of the museum, to suit the characteristics of each group. Running in tandem is an increased attention to varied learning styles, community surveys, audience assessment, representative advisory groups, and other tools for informed understanding of a museum's educational constituency. In practice, the methods of such inquiry fluctuate widely in sophistication, but the overall trend is evident and encouraging.

Locating and Using Professional Resource Materials

Finding professional resource materials to assist in program development is largely an ad hoc business in museum education. There is no firmly established core literature in the field, generally speaking, and no organized compendia of model programs. Informal networking is the currency of exchange in museum education, and colleagues do benefit from mutual advice and shared brochures. Sample materials from education events, such as program notes, grant narratives, and institutional newsletters circulate widely upon request. However, very different programs and approaches can sound very similar in summary description, and shared materials less often are accompanied by explanatory rationales, critical self-assessments of completed programs, or other evaluative review. Simply put, possible format options and

some practical tips are communicated informally more readily than deliberation or wisdom. Recent developments in the area of systematic program evaluation are a significant advance in professional education in museums, but I believe that it is too early to say that such research and analysis have filtered into the main stream of communications. (More about such research studies below.)

At professional meetings, traditionally, the standard format of sessions is the showcase of successful projects by proud organizers. While analytic sophistication and comprehensive thinking tend to be thin at museum conferences, existing practice does have the merit of getting the word out about outstanding approaches to educational programming, among other areas of museology, and spot-lighting innovators in the field. The main practical problem is that virtually none of these meetings are documented except in ephemeral handouts and audio-tapes, so that the information dies quickly except by word-of-mouth. The deeper problem is that program reports from the podium generally follow the institutionally isolated and episodic characteristics of museum programming, follow-up over time is virtually non-existent, and comparative analysis is rare. Therefore, the usefulness of the information is limited, short-lived, and usually directed toward immediate application in other sites.

One of the most demanding challenges, and a challenge that both excites and frustrates educational practitioners in museums, is that of mastering the subject matter of educational programs

sufficiently to play a truly formative role in the sound, interpretive content of programs. Museum educators often act in the role of program facilitation, arranging for presentations by others, while at other times they want or need to serve as instructors or program leaders themselves. In either case, implementation beyond strictly pro forma logistics requires a solid grasp of a subject, including knowledge of intellectual issues current in a given field. In the best of cases, educational research prior to program development comprises both the investigation of audience characteristics and format options, and the comprehension of scholarly knowledge and opinion relevant to the topic at hand. However, logistical realities of public programming jobs in museums, the intellectual experience of individual educators within a specific discipline, the range of available resources (especially in locations outside of major urban centers), and other factors are a frequent problem in this area. I know of very few educators, myself included, who feel confident on a regular basis that they are prepared for this aspect of their preparatory or instructional work. It is a fact of life in museums, however surprising, that even in knowledge-based institutions, professional staff members do not necessarily have access to <u>any</u> in-house, local, or regional research library or related services. Many colleagues use such a facility only if alumni status happens to entitle them to user privileges at a local college, or if their public library offers significant interlibrary loans services with connections to a research

collection. Besides improving access to scholarly tomes or major journal articles, or assisting on-line bibliographic searches, another less immediate possibility comes to mind. Museum (and other community-based) educators could benefit from gradual development of a new category of professional literature: articles or booklet studies that address the educational interpretation itself of broad areas of cultural, scientific, and other studies, emphasizing the emergence of conceptual issues and prevailing themes of interest, as well as relevance to public audiences. Imagine for instance, a brisk, comparative study of programs which treat dilemmas of bio-ethics, or the solid waste crisis, or post-modern culture, in five community-based, collaborative or independently derived institutional settings across the country. I suppose this wishful vision is a plea for integrative writing which bridges the gap between subject disciplines and thoughtful public interpretation.

Barriers to Program Development and Expansion

Though it might be possible to exaggerate their effect, the main barriers to educational program development for adults in museums seem to be fairly straight-forward: 1) Budget pressure on museums, which is nothing new, makes educational programs in particular economically problematic. Outside funding is uncertain, and general operating budgets cannot often afford to subsidize offerings. Modest user fees must completely support the program, or even earn net revenue for the institution. As

both perception and reality, innovation and risk are discouraged by economic concern; 2) Also as a function of budget, education staffs tend to be short-handed and over-extended in relation to the number of events they present and the number of people they serve. The two most serious casualties are freshness and responsive flexibility in new program development and improvement. Chronic lack of opportunities for much, if any, "R & D" suppresses adaptability, change, and currency in the content and form of programs.

In addition, several factors tend to act as disincentives to program development in museums in particular: 1) Changing exhibitions, leading to the frequent re-tooling of educational programs, produces a Sisyphean challenge for educators who are constantly starting over, tackling a new, perhaps unfamiliar subject, and encountering little opportunity for long-term refinement of programs; 2) Except for curatorial personnel, who in some museums, especially smaller ones, may have a direct role in educational program development, many educators are not trained specialists in the subjects they inherit from exhibitions and collections as the basis of much of their institution's adults programs. Even less likely are they to be truly expert in the specific content of a show. As a result, they are often playing "running catch-up" to glean enough information and knowledge of the topic at hand to draft a program plan, identify visiting speakers, and so on. Locally available resource materials in libraries or elsewhere may not be adequate to the

purpose; 3) Traditionally, and recently reconfirmed by Goals 2000 and other initiatives which emphasize education for youth, adult audiences are often given second priority, relative to children, in sharing the limited resources of museum education departments. Also, the majority of educators have much more experience or training with school-aged audiences than with adults; 4) For a long time, the expectation in many museums that educators restrict themselves to derivative re-interpretation of ideas determined by curator/scholars, rather than developing new conceptual approaches, had a demoralizing impact on public programmers and encouraged interpretive conservatism. Conditions have changed considerably over a generation, but the vestiges of the past can still be felt in instances of interpretive reticence, including a sometimes erratic willingness of museums to take their educational lead from the interests of actual and potential participants.

With regard to the expansion of existing programs for adults, and the development of new offerings for expanding audiences, most of the same conditions apply. Though most educators recognize (with affection) the faces of recurrent program participants, and many museums offer a core of reliable programs that predictably please their audiences (and generate income), museum programs always seems to be "starting over" with new topics, new attenders. It requires a larger core audience than many museums have to establish educational opportunities that assume cumulative knowledge over time. Therefore, except

where subject matter varies enough to sustain interest, there is the constant temptation of recurrent attenders to "drop out" as repeat visitors. There is also a major, if invisible, limit to the size of audiences (actual and theoretical) in use of the museum as the main program site. Whenever a program is dependent upon gathering at a single, fixed location, especially on a single, one-chance date, this discourages or excludes a considerable proportion of people who otherwise might be "potential attenders" (due to cost, time, lack of public transportation, inconvenient location, etc.). The alternatives, notably off-site outreach and the use of new media, are beyond the economic resources of all but the largest and most secure museums. The former, in fact, has decreased very markedly in recent years. Add to this the over-extension of staff and the risk-adverse caution of economically stressed institutions, and it becomes very difficult to advocate and rally the resources required in advance to expand programs and mount new ones. As a gross generalization, the issue does not seem to be the absolute limit on the size of potential audiences. Programs of good quality, responsively based on market surveys or intuitive assessment to determine public demand, do continue to bring out growing program attendance at all manner of museums.

Barriers to reaching potential users, and especially non-traditional adult audiences to museum programs, include the kinds of logistical circumstances listed above. The isolated institutional origination of programs tends to restrict

widespread awareness of programs; if a potential participant is not familiar with the museum, he/she is even less likely to make note of its programs. The regular replacement of one new set of topics and programs by another mitigates against gradual development of any new audience. Audience surveys have long suggested that familiarity with the museum, combined with word-of-mouth recommendations of a program, are essential to motivating attendance. Both of these factors favor growth among established audiences, but do little to encourage newcomers who lack a personal connection with the museum by direct experience or through a friend. Getting the word out about available programs is still a common problem, but mere information does not seem to be the crux of the issue.

In the past decade, across the country, many museums have become more attuned to community responsiveness. Among other steps, they have established local advisory boards representing many contingencies, especially under-represented population groups, within the museum. Some education departments have their own audience committees, made up of teachers, active volunteers, professional peers from other educational agencies, and individual or delegated representatives from ethnic minority groups, major local employers, and "ordinary attenders". Beyond sheer good will, many such advisors serve the double role of suggesting ways to make welcome new participants in the museum, while leading the way, it is hoped, as the personal link who may

encourage first-time attendance by individuals who know or feel affinity with them.

Perhaps coming full circle, the attractiveness to new potential users of a museum's core programming, usually artifact-based in a greater or a lesser extent, is a continual underlying issue. Certainly many lectures, walking tours, and hands-on activities of all sorts are offered, which are more broadly conceptualized than strictly defined commentary on the collected objects at hand. A museum of art may present concerts or talks associated only by period and cultural origin with a work or works on view in the gallery. A botanical garden may offer a lively cooking course based on seasonal produce or indigenous eatables. A hypothetical state history museum, with collections still only representing its mainstream cultural components, could launch a participatory oral history project reaching out to much wider circles within the community. By no means does adult education have to be limited to gallery tours, nor is it. At some point in the outward interpretive extension of programming, however, the original basis of museum education upon institutional (or borrowed) collections comes into question. If the unique educational circumstance of museums is the opportunity to encounter "the real thing," then eventually someone in the museum, whether a curator, a funder, an educator, or a member of a programs audience, questions the rationale for straying too far from objects and exhibitions. Frankly, I am a "liberal" on this continuum of professional opinion; I tend to support even very

loose connections with the contents of the galleries, if the programming is substantive, in keeping with the general mission of the institution, and is intellectually satisfying to the audience. The dilemma arises when two separate concerns, both quite legitimate, collide: 1) What should a museum do to expand programming to new potential users, whether more numerous "typical" attenders, or members of new audience groups, when the content of the collections and institutional focus seems to be the (or a) significant factor in restraining the level of interest among potential users, and 2) if collections and exhibitions are one of the defining aspects of museums, per se, what is the justification of using museum resources to mount educational programs that are not related to either specific artifacts, or the special experience of "the real thing" more generally? Assuming that a campus, library, or television can provide alternatives, what is the role of a museum in such educational opportunities? This conundrum, which virtually every museum faces at some point, is probably not more compelling than other logistical or social constraints on reaching potential users, but it is an unresolved issue that influences how museums internally address educational policy and strategy.

To balance the oversimplified impression of adult programs which I have given, many examples of alternative programs in museums demonstrate a higher level of collaboration between institutions. There are also numerous instances of interactive

interpretation based on the contributions of local communities and public participants themselves:

The Terra Museum of American Art in Chicago, collaborates on a continuing basis with the Chicago Department on Aging and the Chicago Cultural Center to provide in-house and outreach programs for the elderly.

The West Bend Gallery of Fine Arts, in Wisconsin, developed "Cultural Collections," a major public event to accentuate its exhibition of Navajo arts, in collaboration with several local organizations including the public library.

A number of museums, including the Chicago Historical Society, regularly provide extended courses (one week or longer) under the aegis of Elderhostel, which is well-recognized for its national network of travel and program options, in every conceivable field, for adults over age 55.

At the Albany Institute of History and Art, members of the general public are invited to the museum to share memories of significant historical periods during their lifetimes, sparked by a few selected, evocative artifacts available in the room. Similar "memory days" and "oral witness" programs have been carried out at the Chicago Historical Society and elsewhere.

A number of museums (from zoos to historical societies to art museums) have well-established "singles" groups, where adults can gather to meet socially and share common educational interests. Some of these specialize in specific age segments of the adult population. These groups are often very flexible in

program development, with input or leadership from participants, and many are formatted as congenial "forums" for dialogue and exchange of perspectives.

The Philadelphia Museum of Art, with a full range of art lectures and other programs, has structured a tiered system for historical and aesthetic presentations, encouraging self-selection of attenders according to their level of interest and knowledge.

To surpass the symbolic and commemorative aspects of public history, The Valentine Museum in Richmond, Virginia, has mounted a series of scholarly symposia including active members of the public, in which participants discuss current ideas in history and changes in the emerging views of events in the past, before being asked to comment upon the content and interpretative approach of the museum's exhibitions and programs.

The Colorado Historical Society (which does have sites throughout the state) and the Brattleboro Museum, VT, both have popular series in which attenders hear from and meet local or visiting authors. Such projects are frequently sponsored by, or are an active collaboration with, local bookstores.

The Science Museum of Minnesota (St. Paul) uses improvisational theater performances to interpret their exhibition "Hunters of the Sky" about birds of prey. The interactive program provokes intense exchange with adults (and children) on questions such as environmental priorities and human

vs. animal rights. Interpretive theater constitutes one of the most interesting recent waves in museum programming.

The Smithsonian Institution's Resident Associates Program has developed perhaps the largest and most comprehensive array of adult lectures, seminar, workshops, field-trips and other programs for its extraordinary "Campus on the Mall." This selection of hundreds of on-site and off-site programs comprises everything from multi-perspective interpretation of key exhibitions to forums for discussion of topical issues like the role of national journalism or the significance of feminist interpretations of society. It covers the full range from object-based learning to broad themes in cultural studies.

Research in the Field of Museum Education

Museum education as a professional field is not yet mature in either the application or generation of relevant research. Until very recently, a decade or less, the short-term, highly individualized educational programs of independent museums have rarely, if ever, interested educational researchers usually concerned with schools and other mainstream educational institutions. Ours is an exceptionally interdisciplinary profession, which embraces not only the subject fields of the museums' focus, but also educational studies, behavioral science, interpretation theory, cultural studies, urban planning, intellectual history, American Studies, and the budding methodologies of museology, to name only a few. As a result, the

basic terms of reference for systematic professional research and discourse are still so fragmented as to inhibit widespread participation. Practitioners whose primary intellectual language comes from ecological science or post-modern aesthetics can have real difficulty in dialogue with each other, or with a statistical program assessment researcher, an educational theorist, or an interpretive content analyst. None of us yet has enough experience decrypting concepts and terms across the board to be able to converse fluently with our own research colleagues on a regular basis. One unfortunate outgrowth of this is a slightly irritated, territorial tendency to mistrust the methods, standards of evidence, and conclusions from other fields, or simply to declare one's own most familiar discipline the "real" discipline of museum education.

Another reason for the general dearth of useful studies of educational theory and practice in museums has to do with the constitution of the profession in the past, and to a great extent today. Many museum educators entered into their career precisely because they found exciting the hands-on interpretation of interesting material in direct contact with the public. It is an easily misconstrued oversimplification, but with an important kernel of truth to say that, given the proximate alternative of a museum career emphasizing research in the curatorial area, educators often chose to be educators in order to be direct interpreters and educational practitioners. Research, whether of artifacts or educational practice, was, therefore, unlikely to

have been a priority in their conception of their careers when they began. I am not surprised that a growing interest in research coincides with, among other things, the mid-career phase of the first really professional generation of museum educators. With experience to bank on and a broad vision of continuing questions and issues, they are prepared to take on in-depth work of this kind.

At least as important, the ever-changing, episodic nature of program development in museums has undercut the feasibility of practitioners themselves undertaking on-going research into audience behavior, programmatic models, learning theory in museums, or other possible topics beyond the scope of a single, short-term educational program. It is also still the case that rewards and recognition for research in museum education are not part of a practitioner's job, nor does undertaking research appear as an asset on most annual performance appraisals. In recent years, some indications of greater interest within the museum field concerning educational research, in various forms, are becoming evident. For some time, the Visitor's Studies Association, an independent organization of audience, program evaluation, and allied researchers based in Jacksonville, AL, has sponsored regular symposia, produced a newsletter, and published a research annual. A standing professional committee of the American Association of Museums, the Committee on Audience Research and Evaluation, is active in promoting, supporting, and presenting studies of high quality in the areas its name

designates. In 1990, under the aegis of Museum Education Roundtable, an independent membership association of museum educators, I was able to inaugurate a modest peer-reviewed, open-submission colloquium for the presentation and discussion of papers in all fields relevant to museum education, broadly defined. Now in its fifth year, it has attracted proposals from all over the country, and internationally (list attached). Submissions are, of course, uneven. As indicated by the proposals themselves and the comments of participants, there also remains real confusion about the perimeters of the field of study and the basic characteristics of a developed research project. This is a predictable part of the gradual maturation of a nascent cluster of interrelated disciplines. Simultaneously, the overall level of inquiry is rising.

Meanwhile, a few museums, including a children's museum in Philadelphia (Please Touch Museum) employ a senior researcher in a regular staff position. With major support from the William Penn Foundation, the same institution recently launched a multi-year, multi-dimensional study of early childhood learning on its site, in cooperation with Harvard University's Project Zero. The "Research Review on Learning in Early Childhood" prepared as part of that project demonstrates how useful such analytical materials would be for educators working with all museum audiences. Such a model has not yet, to my knowledge, been extended to the study of adult learning experiences in museums, but we can hope for the future. Increasingly, major museums hire consultants, and a few

employ evaluators full-time, to carry out quantitative and qualitative evaluation at all stages of programmatic development.

At the Smithsonian Institution, the Office of Institutional Studies carries out research into institutional programs and practice, as well as providing methodological advice to S. I. professionals, visiting fellows, and external colleagues for their studies. In 1994-5, the Smithsonian Institution designated some of the proceeds of its Educational Outreach Fund, for a series of research awards to advance interdisciplinary educational studies by its staff. Also at the Smithsonian, the Center for Museum Studies (formerly: Office of Museum Programs) now compiles an on-line bibliography of dissertations potentially of interest to museum professionals, including, but not limited to educators, concerning museums and museology. The total of citations is now about one thousand, a huge jump in the last year or two. The same office has an annual, open-submission, peer-reviewed grant program to fund museum practitioners who wish to come to Washington for a research sojourn in some area of museum studies.

For the purpose of this essay, however, it is worth noting that only a small fraction of research projects in progress in the field concern adult audiences or programming issues relevant to learners beyond traditional, institutional schooling. Some examples are the Winterthur Museum's visitor study, "Learning How Visitors Learn," or the on-going work of Philip Yenawine and

Abigail Housen who are studying identifiable phases of aesthetic experience in adults at the Museum of Modern Art (NYC) and elsewhere. Minda Borun has designed several studies to investigate the naive notions about scientific facts which adult visitors bring with them to the Franklin Institute in Philadelphia.

As separate, focused studies begin to proliferate, the next task for the professional research community will be the development of a synthetic literature. This should begin with such still remarkably infrequent, though basic steps, as the development of comparative studies and the regular inclusion of literature reviews in each study. Clear articulation of concepts is also crucial, so that terminology may evolve through the dialectic refinement of cumulative research within and across the interdisciplinary lines of informal education and museology.

The progress of research in the field of community-based education, especially in museums, seems bound to be a concerted effort of several distinct professional communities: 1) educational practitioners in museums, 2) staff or consultant researchers working within museums, and 3) external scholars, especially academics, in the fields of education, sociology and anthropology, cultural studies, interpretation theory and others. The perspectives, objectives, language, and intellectual agenda of each group overlap, but each brings quite different emphases to the field. My hope is that study and dialogue will remain a dynamic, if somewhat messy, endeavor. In general, practitioners

need the model of solid and sophisticated methodology to help raise the analytical standard of their contributions. In-house staff and consultant researchers often combine intimate knowledge of the institutions they study with specialized research techniques. To date, however, they tend to come disproportionately from a limited range of disciplines, especially quantitative fields based in social science methodology. Scholars from universities and elsewhere who turn to museums as "laboratories" for study, or for the unique issues they present in social, cultural, or educational policy, bring a strong tradition of method and thought. Cumulatively, they illustrate the benefits of many disciplines and interdisciplinary approaches to the relevant questions. However, they are "visitors" in the realm of community education, and the ultimate priorities which guide research in museums and elsewhere should, I believe, continue to come primarily from within. This is important both for maintaining useful relevancy in the studies undertaken and to best represent the interests of the public clientele we serve. I think one of the most important, and difficult, tasks we have ahead for the field, in the next decade or so, is in the creation of a body of professional thought that incorporates both questions and knowledge about the philosophy (philosophies), analytical history, and intellectual theory of education in museums and other community-based institutions. Until we begin to do this, to a substantive degree, we are stuck with an entire conceptual foundation that is fuzzy and unstable,

to say the least. The current state of thought in the field renders us profoundly, but unconsciously, dependent upon derivative principles, only half understood within museums, from other, often dated scholarly and social arenas. I am concerned that in a period of marvelous information expansion, we do not let data collection too far outstrip concept formulation.

Beside the analytic study of topics in museum education, a more basic resource would be invaluable to facilitate better program development for adults. Because of the circumstances I have described, especially institutional independence and the ephemeral duration of most programs, there is no even remotely comprehensive repository of sample educational materials, program documentation, or video recordings of model programs. To collect, organize, and make available studies, research, and model materials concerning adult education in museums and collateral organizations would be an exhausting, but tremendously worthwhile, resource service for some central agency such as the Department of Education to undertake. The vertical files of existing graduate programs in museum education are neither adequate nor accessible. Earlier attempts to manage such a central resource were short-lived. Occasional discussions of such a service by other Federal agencies have not gone far, to my knowledge, and have repeatedly been caught on the differing disciplinary specializations of the National Science Foundation and the Endowments of Arts and Humanities, for instance.

Following discussions with the NIPELL conference panel, April 12-13, 1995, and identification of some common priorities among that impressive group, here are a few of my initial recommendations for promotion of improved and expanded informal adult education through research initiatives of the Department of Education:

Informal educators do learn from and apply ideas from successful programs when they become aware of them. So, improving access to centrally available documentation (reports, printed materials, assessments, videos) would be met with frequent, productive use by individual educators and institutions. Similarly, one authoritative resource agent needs to take responsibility for compiling some basic reference categories for organizing a wide range of otherwise ephemeral materials which originate in highly diverse circumstances: program documentation by institutional type, subject matter, audience type, and many other significant criteria, as determined by the functional use of educational practitioners. In particular, the field would benefit from systematic documentation of collaborative, non-traditional, and interactive programs, as categories, as well as proven strategies for expansion into services for new audiences.

Similarly, educators need a clearing-house for proliferating research studies in community-based and informal programming. Many or most of these studies are still in-house projects, seldom published and infrequently presented in a professional forum.

Access and exchange would be useful for practitioners designing comparable programs. It is a necessary condition for any development of comprehensive and comparative research from which broader principles of theory and practice can be derived over time. Mutual knowledge should also help raise the technical standards of methodologies as well. Making in-house studies widely available will require not only logistical provisions, but the persuasive power of the bully-pulpit to overcome a proprietary sense that institutional studies must remain confidential or strictly protected. Perhaps this will be the most difficult issue of all.

Focus groups might be encouraged to compile reading lists and recommended bibliographies to encourage development of a common professional literature, loosely speaking, and to identify excellent materials from the full range of relevant disciplines which inform museum education, community education, and allied activities. In my experience, nobody has the individual capacity to chart a course through all the possibilities. In addition, the uneven quality of research in any young field is a particular obstacle for those crossing disciplinary lines for information and ideas, and for newcomers or educators-in-training.

The Department of Education need not take on all aspects of research promotion itself. However, it should take all opportunities to encourage on-going forums for research presentations, in oral forum and publication. I think it will be most beneficial if such sessions are publicized and presented

both in general professional meetings, which practicing educators attend, and in specialized venues for researchers specifically.

Overall, I believe that visible, proactive effort in the field of community-based learning for adults will be valuable for its own sake. The very concept of integrating the results of reliable studies into the development of solid, interesting, locally-originated educational programs, and seeking out that knowledge from a widening array of allied institutions is just now on the "cusp." We need to support that fragile trend, in part as a fundamental form of collaboration itself.

Meanwhile, listening to committed, broadly experienced colleagues during April's panel meeting has convinced me of the critical importance of developing a research agenda for the study of informal, community-based adult learning in non-traditional institutions which is appropriate to each of those key characteristics. That is, both the goals and methods of developing research in this area must take into account the need to follow very different procedures and operating principles from those employed for more familiar forms of research into formal, sequenced education, provided for young people, in a graded and tested system, and based in schools and similarly structured institutions. Above all, the basic criteria for developing essential research questions and methods must be responsive to the local, and often autonomous, circumstances of community-based, informal adult learning programs of all sorts. For the U.S. Department of Education the required flexibility may well

entail diverging from well established patterns of research and project implementation to meet the needs of adult constituencies in the grass-roots, while finding ways to maintain high standards of research and using project results to empower "non-traditional" educational institutions, program developers, and their clients.

My final, and strongest, recommendation is that we build into the effort every possible assurance that we keep research development broad-ranging, interdisciplinary, and directed toward the philosophical, conceptual, and technical advancement of educational services to adults in our diverse public constituencies. The field of community-based life-long learning for adults is too new and too diverse to be prematurely strictured by overly rigid assumptions about what forms of study will or will not ultimately benefit the public. As the panel suggests, and the many and varied examples of research refered to during April's proceedings confirms, educational practitioners, scholars, and community representatives are all engaged in new, useful, and sometimes only partly matured forms of educational research. It is much too soon in this composite enterprise to exclude from consideration the contributions of any approach or discipline.

Selected Readings

"Art Museums and Education," Special Issues, Journal of Aesthetic Education, 19.2 (Summer 185).

The Art Museum as Educator, eds. B. A. Newsom and A. Z. Silver (Council on Museums and Education in the Visual Arts/University of California Press, 1978).

Dierking, L., "The Family Museum Experience: Implications for Research," Journal of Museum Education, 14.2 (1989), 9-11.

Dierking, L., "Learning Theory and Learning Styles: An Overview," Journal of Museum Education, 16.1 (1991), 4-6.

Falk, J. H. and L. Dierking, The Museum Experience (Whalesback Books, 1992).

Gardner, H., Art Education and Human Development (J. Paul Getty Trust, 1990).

Giese, R. N., et al, "Evaluating the Experience," Museum News, 72.1 (1993), 46-59.

Hilke, D. D., "The Family as a Learning System: An Observational Study of Families in Museums," Marriage and Family Review, 13.3/4 (1989), 1-1-129.

Hooper-Greenhill, E., Museums and the Shaping of Knowledge (Routledge, 1992).

MacKinney, L. "Research: The Secret Is in the Asking," Arts: The Magazine of the Members of the Minneapolis Institute of Art, 18.1 (1995), 4-5.

Museum Education Anthology: 1973-1983; Perspectives on Informal Learning, A Decade of Roundtable Reports, ed. S. K. Nichols (Museum Education Roundtable, 1984).

Museums, Adults, and the Humanities: A Guide to Educational Programming, ed. Z. W. Collins (American Association of Museums, 1981).

Patterns in Practice; Selections from the Journal of Museum Education, ed. S. K. Nichols (Museum Education Roundtable, 1992).

"Research Review on Learning in Early Childhood," Please Touch Museum, unpublished, 1995.

Storr, A. "Suggestions for Preparing a Research Proposal in Museum Education," unpublished training materials, 1994.

Storr, A., "Professionalism and Research in Museum Education," Journal of Museum Education, 17.3 1992), 20-21.

Visitor Surveys: A User's Manual (American Association of Museum, 1990)

Visitor Studies: Theory, Research and Practice, ed. S. Bitgood et al, collected research, continuing series (Center for Social Design, 1988-)

What Research Says About Learning in Science Museums, collected essays (Association of Science-Technology Centers, 1990).

Williams, L. V., "Apples, Oranges, and Sometimes Unicorns,: Appreciating the Differences between Individual Learners," unpublished essay presented at "Science Learning in the Informal Setting, The Chicago Academy of Sciences, 1989.

Professional Resource Centers & Organizations

Center for Museum Studies (until recently: Office of Museum Programs), Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC. Director: Rex Ellis, 202-357-3102.

Office of Institutional Studies, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC. Director: Zahava Doering, 202-357-1300.

Education Committee, American Association of Museums. Chair: Mary Ellen Munley, Empire State Museum, Albany, NY, 518-474-1569. (See also the Committee on Audience Research and Evaluation.)

Museum Education Roundtable, Washington, DC. Chair: A. T. Stephens, 202-232-6084.

Visitor Studies Association. Contact: Stephen Bitgood, Center for Social Design, Jacksonville, Al, 205-782-5640.

The major established graduate programs in Museum Education and Museum Studies provide a varied array of courses, seminars, and resource materials pertaining to public service and related research in the field:

Museum Education Program, The George Washington University, Washington, DC. Director: Carol Stapp, 202-994-6820.

Museum Education Programs, Bank Street College of Education, New York City. Contact: Nina Jensen, 212-875-4491.

In addition, a number of major museums provide educational resource centers, primarily designed for assisting teachers but useful to others, and/or significant professional libraries, which may be available to educational researchers. See, for example, the Resource Center at the Kraft Education Center, Art Institute of Chicago.